UNITED NATIONS

WORLD CHRONICLE

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GUEST: **ANTOINE BLANCA**
United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Human Rights

JOURNALISTS: Jon Leyne, BBC
Judy Lessing, Radio New Zealand
Tuyet Nguyen, United Press International

MODERATOR: Michael Littlejohns

INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

Antoine Blanca, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Human Rights, discusses the general situation of indigenous communities in view of the preparations for the International Year of the World's Indigenous People. He believes that an information campaign highlighting the issues of the indigenous population and other minorities is vital to tackle the problems facing both groups. Mr. Blanca hopes that a consensus would be reached in the Vienna Conference regarding the declaration on the world's indigenous people.

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Executive Producer: Kamil Taha
Director: Ivan Stoynov
Production Assistant: Sheila Poinesette

ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is WORLD CHRONICLE, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's WORLD CHRONICLE.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns and this is WORLD CHRONICLE.

Sometimes they're known as the fourth world; they're our link with an ancient past: the original human communities from the Arctic to Australia, they're the world's indigenous people, groups who have suffered probably more than any other from modernization, population movements, and colonization.

To highlight the international awareness of the problems faced by the indigenous communities, the United Nations has proclaimed 1993 as the International Year of the Indigenous People. Our guest today, Antoine Blanca, has a strong commitment to the issues of the indigenous groups. He's the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Human Rights. A national of France, Mr. Blanca will be interviewed here at United Nations headquarters in New York by Jon Leyne of the BBC, Judy Lessing of Radio New Zealand, and Tuyet Nguyen of United Press International. Before we talk to Mr. Blanca, let's look at some aspects of the struggles of the indigenous people. Our correspondent Steve Whitehouse reports:

NARRATION:
These are the images that attract visitors -- picturesque, part of a far-away way of life. It's to redress these perceptions and to help them assert their rights that the UN has declared 1993 as International Year for the World's Indigenous People.

Who are they? Perhaps the best way to describe them is as the first people, the original inhabitants of the land. And they're far more numerous than most people realize -- at least 300 million people living in 70 nations. But they share many common problems in the countries that have grown up around them.

BISHOP REEVES:
They've been marginalized, pushed to the edges of these societies, not invited to bring their own culture in, but

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basically asked to accept the presuppositions of other people about how societies ought to run.

NARRATION:
Guatemalan Indian activist Rigoberta Menchu, the latest Nobel Peace Prize winner, is received by the UN Secretary-General. It's one sign of the growing visibility of indigenous people, like here, at the Earth Summit in Rio, protesting the destruction of forests. It's hoped the Year will make the UN and its agencies and governments more responsive. It's one aspect of the movement's long-term agenda.

They are making their presence felt at the UN. A working group of the UN Human Rights Commission meets ever year. The ILO has adopted a new Convention, and it's expected that a universal declaration on their rights will be ready for the 1993 UN General Assembly. But beyond this, the indigenous have much more to offer.

BISHOP REEVES:
Indigenous peoples have a great sense of caring for the earth, of being responsible for it, of using it, but yet sustaining it. I believe that until people make peace with the earth, there's no chance of finding peace in the world as a whole.

NARRATION:
There are success stories, like these Colombian Indians who've had their land returned. 1993 will give a major boost to the struggle of indigenous people worldwide.

LITTLEJOHNS: Under-Secretary-General Blanca, the United Nations has been in existence now for more than 47 years. Why is it taking so long to address the problems of the indigenous people? After all, they've been around for thousands of years. Is it perhaps some sort of a guilt trip on the part of the first world, the -- what we're pleased to call the developed countries?

BLANCA: Certainly all are at the same time. I think that we lost very much time in getting clearly the issue. Certainly because during the colonial period, many western countries, especially in Europe of course, were avoiding tackling the subject.

And also [there are] many concerned, directly-interested countries whose governments [have] equally avoided tackling the issue. I mean that many countries, for instance, around the world, in North America, in South America, indigenous people were not certainly a threat, but were certainly something that everyone preferred to forget about.

LITTLEJOHNS: You mentioned Europe, Mr. Blanca: in fact, there are relatively few indigenous peoples in Europe, I believe. The Lappish people, for example, in northern Sweden come to mind, but they're exceptional; there are not very many, if any at all, in western Europe.

BLANCA: I was not talking exactly about the direct interest of Europe. But historically, for instance, Spain or Portugal, with many former colonies in South America or Africa, or even Asia.

LITTLEJOHNS: If you'll remember, the 500th anniversary of Columbus's landing in what we call the New World fell like a lead balloon after people had been making plans for a great celebration. In fact, even in Genoa I think they didn't celebrate it. Is this perhaps also related to the feeling that the indigenous peoples were badly done by, as a result of what happened after Columbus's landings?

BLANCA: Oh, I think that is not -- it's seldom though that -- the fact that the United Nations decided that the following year of the 1992 commemorations would be devoted to the indigenous people is not a mere coincidence.

LITTLEJOHNS: What will be the outcome of this declaration? What will the indigenous peoples get out of it?

BLANCA: In my view, it's only a start. Right now, we have to tackle more and more the issue in close link with the indigenous people, communities, themselves. And I was impressed myself. You know that I'm very new myself as an Under-Secretary-General for Human Rights, and I was surprised by the dedication, by the commitment not only of my staff, but beyond, of many, many NGOs, and of course by the extraordinary presence of the representatives around the world of the indigenous people during the meetings. The preparation lasted already ten years, hmm?

LITTLEJOHNS: So there's really a lot of sympathy for the --

BLANCA: Absolutely.

LITTLEJOHNS: -- 300 million indigenous people.

LEYNE: Mr. Blanca, the indigenous peoples' representatives have already called for separate representation at the General Assembly of the United Nations. Is that feasible?

BLANCA: It is feasible. I think that the United Nations right now are absolutely decided to show exactly the reality of the situation everywhere around the world. And it is very courageous for the whole organization, since of course some countries directly concerned could be somewhat hindered by the fact that the issue could be a sort of political issue, a political pretext for political controversy.

LEYNE: How would you do that, though? Would you give them observer status, like the Palestine Liberation Organization, for instance? And who would you select to represent them?

BLANCA: Ah, that is a very, very good question. Of course, on the issue of selectivity, certainly everything could be badly discussed, but the representatives, in fact, and the NGOs' representatives, decided themselves directly about who was to be convened to the meeting.

LESSING: Mr. Blanca, you mentioned the non-governmental organizations' commitment to the Year and the 10 years of planning, but what about the United Nations commitment itself? I understand from talking to indigenous people and to diplomats that the staff in Geneva where this year is being coordinated is very small and overworked and tries very hard to do what is needed but really doesn't have either the people or the money resources to make this year the kind of success that say the Year for Disabled People seems to be. Can you address the question of the United Nations commitment to the year?

BLANCA: Well, in the first place, of course, the United Nations organization has the lead. But without the help of the whole United Nations system, especially organizations like ILO, WHO, for instance, FAO, and other direct UN organizations that are a little bit more autonomous, like UNICEF, UNDP for instance, it would be very difficult for us to organize the follow-up of the meeting on December 10th. And fortunately, the follow-up is related with tens and tens of projects, small projects. The scope of such projects is between $10,000 and $15,000. And organized by NGOs, by specialized agencies, by the Centre for Human Rights itself also, or in coordination with two or three NGOs directly interested.

And to do so, we decided to open a voluntary fund, and the goal is to gather $500,000, U.S. dollars, and that certainly by the end of December the figure reached would be around $300,000, and certainly before the end of January we are going to get the rest. They are small figures, but they are the figures concerning only the UN. And we hope of course around the world, with the NGOs, that would represent maybe a million, some million dollars.

LESSING: You're talking about voluntary funds from governments, or from non-governmental organizations?

BLANCA: I am talking about from governments.

LESSING: And you have had a response, I mean, you are actually getting more than just pledges, but real money?

BLANCA: The pledges are relatively modest. But I should say we were also modest in our requests. The goal will be reached.

LITTLEJOHNS: The programme is WORLD CHRONICLE, our guest is Antoine Blanca, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Human Rights. For the benefit of anyone who may be a little confused by the alphabet soup that we have in the United Nations, perhaps I should say that NGOs means non-governmental organizations, ILO is the International Labour Organisation, WHO is the World Health Organization, FAO is the Food and Agriculture Organization, and UNDP is the United Nations Development Programme. After that, Tuyet Nguyen.

NGUYEN: Mr. Blanca, we heard very little about the African natives. Don't they belong to the definition of indigenous groups, or are they just tribals? Or can you make a distinction between the two?

BLANCA: That is very hard to say. I think there might be some African groups who could be classified as indigenous people, but the final decision was different. As I said before, it's always a little bit unfair to make distinctions. But at last we organized the meeting today. The problem really is not making differences between one African group and the other. The main problem is in countries with very specific people -- Lapone (Lapp), Indians, North American Indians in Canada and the United States, or Mexico -- of course, Mexico is also a North American country. And in Central America, where there are the former colonized people from the Spanish, and the main distinction in South America could be certainly among the descendants of all civilizations, such as

Aztec, Maya, and the unprotected, very unprotected, absolutely unprotected people living for instance in the Amazon region.

NGUYEN: There were many complaints that many of the groups, indigenous groups, can't afford to attend international meetings. Can your fund take care of those trips also as well as the projects for their own development?

BLANCA: Oh, certainly, we have a lot of projects. To me, if -- certainly we are getting some complaints, but I think that's not fair, because everyone knows we are starting a process, we are going to rectify it if it is needed, and we are also [going] to include more and more people and to gather more and more means. But to organize it from one day to the next, it was a little bit difficult. But myself, I am very satisfied with the fact that the UN meeting was a great success.

LEYNE: Mr. Blanca, indigenous peoples are usually, although not always, in the minority in the countries in which they live. Do you think they have special needs different from other national minorities, firstly; and secondly --

BLANCA: Excuse me?

LEYNE: Do you think they have different needs from other national minorities?

LITTLEJOHNS: Different needs.

BLANCA: Needs, yes.

LEYNE: And what sort of role do you think the United Nations has in protecting minorities in general?

BLANCA: In the first place, we have to inform, to inform the public. I think the public is not very aware of the reality of the situation. We have to raise the awareness of public opinion, and when well informed, we know now that the response is always very positive. Information, information -- and I thank you very much for organizing this panel -- information is the first asset for all of us. And the second point, the United Nations has also to sensitize more and more the other organizations of the United Nations system. Many of them are -- *trainer les pieds* we say in French. Nobody speaks French, eh?

LEYNE: Yes, he does, our friend here.

BLANCA: *Trainer les pieds*, in English that is -- what is it?

NGUYEN: Dragging your feet.

BLANCA: Dragging, dragging your feet. And because also we are living in the throes of difficult economic times. And that for most of them to tackle the problems of the indigenous people is not a priority. But it is also my duty, and the Centre for Human Rights, to convince them that it is not only a priority, but in addition is not expensive, not an expensive priority.

LEYNE: But there have been suggestions recently that the United Nations should take a much more active role in protecting national minorities, it should almost intervene to protect them. Is that realistic? Can the UN do that against the will of nation states?

BLANCA: Bon, I think there is a strong commitment from the Secretary-General of the United Nations, there is a strong commitment from the General Assembly to protect minorities. And not only of course the indigenous population, you have to protect minorities also at the level of each nation, especially nowadays when the problem is worsening in many countries. But concerning the indigenous people, I think we have to distinguish between the two scenarios. The first one is a concern that -- is related with the cultural problem; that, for instance, the *Lapone* (Lapp) culture, the Quechua-Aymara culture in South America, the Maya culture in Central America for instance, or the aboriginal culture in some countries, the Maori culture in New Zealand for instance.

But that is a cultural problem nowadays. The indigenous people concerned are no longer, fortunately, survivors. There is not a physical threat to them. But, as I said a few minutes ago, the physical threats exist against some other indigenous people, very unprotected, especially in the Amazonian region. And I'm very concerned myself, each time when I read in newspapers that [there is] new drilling or mines in the Amazonian region, or in order to find new fields for raising corn or opening new roads, for instance, I know that hundreds and hundreds of indigenous Indians living in the Amazon area are going to lose not only their own way of life, but also even their lives.

LESSING: I wonder whether I could ask you, Mr. Blanca, in Vienna in June of 1993 is the Human Rights World Convention. Will the specific needs and human rights of indigenous people be on the agenda of that meeting?

BLANCA: Absolutely. Absolutely. Absolutely. It is an important point on our agenda, and the indigenous community, at the NGO level, are going to be strongly represented there in Vienna.

NGUYEN: The UN is also preparing a universal declaration of the rights of indigenous people. Can you tell us the progress so far that has been made, and what kind of rights do you expect to give to those people?

BLANCA: That is not only in my hands, of course. And as I said, the first thing for us is to inform better the public, and in addition, to inform, even to press a little bit, the delegation in the United Nations.

LEYNE: Indigenous peoples have always had a bad deal, haven't they? Do you think that political systems around the world really are built against them? That indigenous peoples never get a good deal within conventional political systems?

BLANCA: That, in many ways, is absolutely exact. And that is evident, even, in most countries. Everyone has it in mind. And that is why I said that the process is going to be very long, that that is only a start. But I'm very happy to witness, at least as Under-Secretary-General for Human Rights, that at least the process is starting, and is starting well.

LEYNE: Is there any model you'd like to see for better treatment? Is there one government in the world that's got it right so far?

BLANCA: No, I prefer to avoid any answer about that.

LITTLEJOHNS: Is this a very controversial question, would you say? Or is it going to be relatively easy to arrive at a consensus on the declaration?

BLANCA: It is very easy to reach a broad consensus, but when we start looking for solutions, and when solutions imply also some sacrifices from apparently wealthy societies, it is a little bit difficult to go and to demand. Hmm? But the United Nations can help. They are going to help.

LITTLEJOHNS: But you mentioned what's happening in South America. Is there going to be a lot of resistance from some of those South American governments?

BLANCA: Apparently not. Apparently not. But I know that nobody is going to say and to answer directly that they are avoiding the subject.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Blanca, that's all the time we have. Thank you for joining us on this edition of WORLD CHRONICLE.

Our guest has been Antoine Blanca, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Human Rights. He was interviewed here at United Nations Headquarters in New York by Jon Leyne of the BBC, Judy Lessing of Radio New Zealand, and Tuyet Nguyen of United Press International.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of WORLD CHRONICLE.

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